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IN RETROSPECT: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, by Robert McNamara. Times Books, 432 pp., \$27.50.

BY LAURENCE I. BARRETT

A JOB OFFER from his alma mater, Harvard Business School, caused young Bob McNamara to rush his marriage proposal to Margaret Craig because the couple would have to change coasts quickly. Putting efficiency over romance, McNamara proposed from a pay phone, then engaged in long-distance wedding arrangements. Marg sent him a telegram; she had to know his middle name for the invitations. He replied with a single word: Strange. To which his fiancée responded: "No matter if it is strange. What is it?"

Robert Strange McNamara tells this anecdote, and a few others, to moisten his sere, somber work, "In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam." The former Defense Secretary could also have been providing a subtitle and a warning. What he calls "the book I planned never to write" is indeed strange. Unlike the memoirs of many public figures, it is rich in mea culpa and devoid of apologia. Though he presents it as his story, it is also an extended sermon. And as he describes pivotal decisions that dragged the nation toward catastrophe, McNamara alternates between scrupulously objective reporting and rueful appraisal.

But along the way, Marg Craig's line echoes in an altered context: no matter if it is strange, "In Retrospect" is a fascinating venture, thoroughly relevant to the 1990s though a quarter-century late in coming. That the Kennedy and Johnson administrations failed horrendously in waging what contemporaries called McNamara's War is hardly a fresh or controversial bulletin. Aging hawks and doves of that era agreed on that long ago. What McNamara adds is an insider's detailed explanation of why "the best and the brightest" flopped so badly, along with a rigorous argument that we remain vulnerable still to similar failures.

One of the early blunders was the cabal by junior officials in Washington to encourage the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem, whose leadership of South Vietnam seemed inadequate in mid-1963.

At that stage, the American commitment was relatively modest, less than 16,000 men serving as advisers rather than combatants. John Kennedy and most of his advisers were still prisoners of the domino theory and hence deter-

gled to understand the war he had inherited.

In evaluating these early harbingers of disaster, McNamara identifies systemic failings. Many high-caliber intellects adorned the administration, but neither Kennedy nor Johnson had skilled veterans who understood the culture, politics and history of Southeast Asia. There was no counterpart to the corps of Sovietologists who helped guide relations with Moscow.

Further, Washington frequently allowed itself to be hoodwinked by inaccurate reporting from the ground. Periodically, the Defense Intelligence Agency or the Central Intelligence Agency would warn the top echelon that the enemy was making frightening progress. These bulletins eventually prompted piecemeal escalation of the American effort. But there was no constant, hard analysis at a high level that assimilated real events and balanced them against all possible options. Schemes to neutralize South Vietnam, including one proposed by Charles de Gaulle, never received thorough vetting.

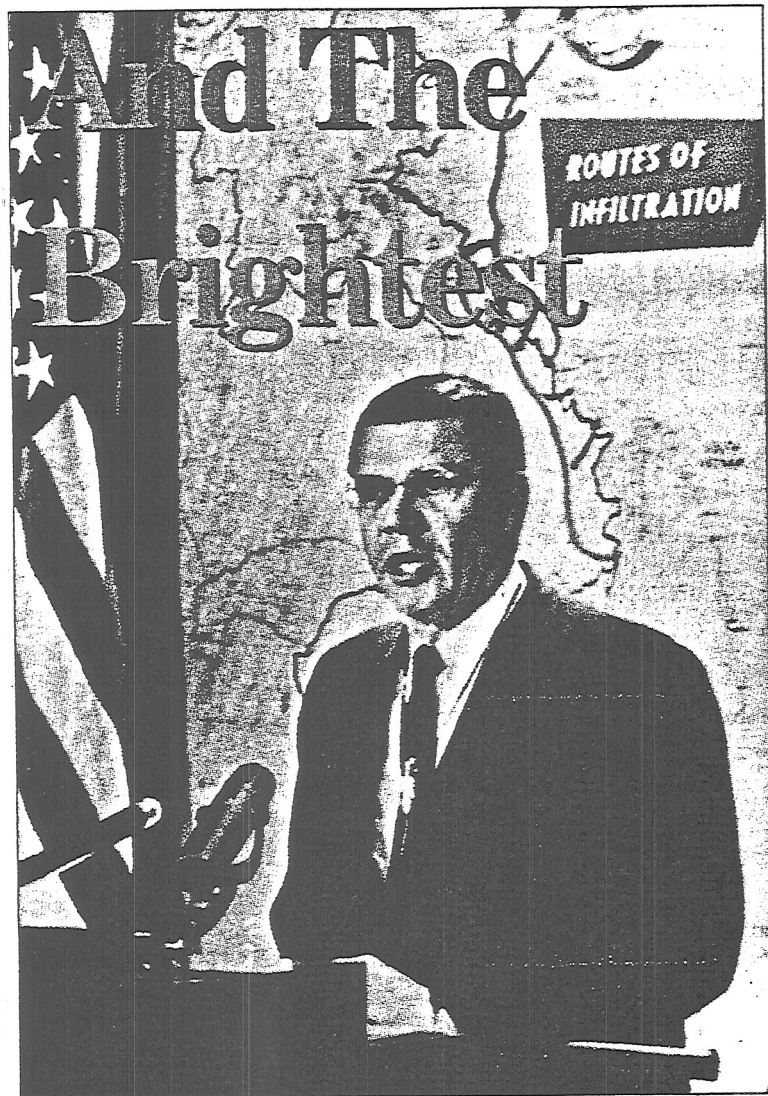
In memory, Vietnam appears to have totally dominated the late '60s and early '70s and it is easy to assume that it

mined to prop up South Vietnam. But they also feared increased American involvement so they labored to make the Saigon regime strong enough to defend its territory. Because the maladroit Diem seemed unequal to the task, several of Kennedy's men signaled Vietnamese generals that Washington wanted a coup. Then, as would happen repeatedly, the senior policy makers began to zigzag. Why? Because, McNamara explains, "We did not see how we could replace [Diem] with a more satisfactory regime."

By November, ironically, Washington's effort to lure Diem into a more intelligent course began to succeed. But the initiative for a military revolt had taken on its own momentum. Just three weeks before Lee Oswald assassinated Kennedy, Vietnamese officers murdered Diem and his influential brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. The ensuing chaos in Vietnam, together with the sudden transition in Washington, set back the war effort. Further, Saigon fell victim to a succession of feckless governments as Lyndon Johnson strug-

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The Best



AP Photo

Robert McNamara discusses air strikes on North Vietnam at a Pentagon news conference in 1966.

also monopolized the attention of the government's upper echelon. Wrong, McNamara reminds us. Even after American casualties mounted into the thousands, the Administration failed to organize a high-level group that would focus exclusively on the war. Vietnam frequently had to compete for attention with urgent problems in Europe or the Middle East.

McNamara himself gradually became bearish and attempted — albeit haltingly — to steer Johnson toward efforts to negotiate. At Christmas, 1965, the Defense Secretary short-circuited regular procedure by inviting himself to LBJ's ranch for a private conversation. There he persuaded the president to suspend bombing North Vietnam long enough to try an energetic diplomatic undertaking. But there was little enthusiasm for the effort elsewhere in the government and Hanoi was hardly cooperative.

In recounting these and other frustrations, McNamara refuses to depict himself as the hero or to paint colleagues who were slower to face reality as goats. Rather he describes a group in agony. It was unwilling to accept what it thought would be a major Cold War defeat and leery of escalating the fighting to the point where hot war with the Soviet Union or China became a major risk. McNamara's own advice, he concedes, was sometimes "limited and

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shallow" and occasionally inconsistent. He waited until May, 1967 to write a definitive memorandum to the president explaining why existing strategy had hit a dead end. It was the beginning of a painful estrangement that led to McNamara's departure under pressure in February, 1968, shortly before a beleaguered Lyndon Johnson himself announced his retirement.

But through much of his tenure, he had the unpleasant task of defending in public a policy about which he had growing private doubts. The personal cost was high, particularly as many friends and former associates turned against the war. One evening in 1966 he had a private dinner with Jackie Kennedy in her New York apartment. "She suddenly exploded," McNamara writes. "She turned and began, literally, to beat on my chest, demanding that I 'do something to stop the slaughter.'"

In re-creating that poignant scene, McNamara avoids telling us how he felt, or how he answered the widow of the president he revered. Typically, the man who loved numbers, who had risen high in the business world and government on the ladder of quantitative analysis, is stingy in dealing with emotion.

He has no such inhibitions in pleading that Americans remember and understand the lessons of the Vietnam War, which ended 20 years ago this month, as they apply to the puzzling challenges after the Cold War. Though McNamara long ago abandoned conventional hawkishness, he isn't afflicted with Vietnam Syndrome as it is commonly understood. He doesn't oppose military intervention per se. Rather he preaches the need for a stringent, clear-eyed definition of American interests in the new era and for meticulous policy formulation based on those interests.